



# Raymond Geuss, "Not Thinking like a Liberal"

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**Raymond Geuss.** *Not Thinking like a Liberal.* Harvard University Press 2022. 224 pp. \$29.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780674270343).

I would never have predicted that Raymond Geuss would write a book like this, but it makes perfect sense that he has. Like much of Geuss's work, *Not Thinking like a Liberal* offers a critique of 'the real total ideology of our era'—namely, 'the conjunction of democracy, liberalism, and capitalism' (xiv). When he finished graduate school in 1971, Geuss was already convinced that 'the tradition which runs from Locke, through J.S. Mill, to Rawls [is] not the place to look for insight into anything' (161), and nothing that has happened in the last five decades has changed his mind about this. But criticizing liberalism is tricky. Its critics often target its privileging of 'the consciousness of the sovereign individual' (156), but they obviously cannot do so from no particular perspective. If individual subjects are not sovereign, then 'complete abstraction is impossible and a "view from nowhere" does not exist' (164). A more promising strategy is to show how liberalism looks from the perspective of some rival standpoint, perhaps a community or tradition whose 'slightly deviant' outlook provides the 'cognitive distance' (42) needed to identify liberalism's limitations. *Not Thinking like a Liberal*—which Geuss says he wrote quickly in January 2021, under lockdown and just after Brexit (xi)—does precisely that. It is an extraordinarily thoughtful autobiography which traces the intellectual journey Geuss has been on since his school days. Geuss therefore calls it 'a kind of ethnographic account, with a strong autobiographical component' (2). But as we will see, the book is also a sustained philosophical argument, of a highly distinctive sort.

In addition to a preface and an introduction, *Not Thinking like a Liberal* consists of twelve chapters which can be roughly divided into three groups. The first seven chapters describe Geuss's childhood experiences at a unique boarding school near Philadelphia. It was run by Hungarian members of the Order of the Pious Schools, a Catholic order founded during the Counter-Reformation. Having firsthand experience of several repressive regimes, its priests were not authoritarians, but neither were they liberals. Geuss describes them as subscribing to 'a kind of existentialist Catholicism with the characteristic existentialist hostility to anything that seemed to make appeal to human nature' (96). They rejected Thomism, but they also rejected 'the conception of the sovereign, self-transparent individual which was central to all forms of liberalism' (33). As creations of God, human beings are far from sovereign; as fallen creatures, they act on 'highly obscure, [...] unstable impulses and desires' (33). They are poor judges of what they want, so the human good cannot be the mere satisfaction of existing preferences. From this perspective, many liberal values—especially the ideal of state neutrality with respect to the good—are non-starters. Though the young Geuss was not a theist, his education seems to have left him suspicious of many liberal pieties, and unusually open to alternatives.

The next three chapters describe Geuss's time as a student at Columbia University. They are organized around his recollections of three of his professors: Robert Paul Wolff, Sidney Morgenbesser, and Robert Denoon Cumming. All three taught political philosophy, and all were 'critics of liberalism from the left' (107). Geuss was first drawn to Wolff because he was intrigued by Wolff's philosophical 'anarchism'—his denial that we have a 'normative obligation to obey the



directives of legitimate governments’ (109). Geuss ultimately found Wolff’s anarchism unconvincing, deciding that it stemmed from ‘narrow Kantian ideas about the moral’ (110). But he credits Wolff with helping him to see the importance of linking political philosophy to concrete facts about the world we actually inhabit. In particular, he credits Wolff for offering a valuable critical perspective on the work of John Rawls, whose *Theory of Justice* was about to be published. Rawls, according to Wolff, was ‘an ideological genius’ who ‘showed how one could argue from accepted liberal premises to the “justice” of gross forms of social and economic inequality’ (117). Rawls therefore ‘permitted a population deeply committed to massive *real* inequality to feel good about themselves’ (118). The second teacher Geuss discusses, and the one he says ‘had overall the greatest influence’ (122) on him, was Sidney Morgenbesser. Morgenbesser was a dynamic talker and thinker: ‘Sidney’s whole life was discussion, and most of it was public discussion’ (123). Geuss’s reminiscences of him are the funniest and most entertaining parts of the book. Morgenbesser seems to have contributed several things to Geuss’s evolving ideas about political philosophy. One was an appreciation for ‘groups who felt themselves to have essential identities’ (123), identities from which they could not even imagine distancing themselves. To the members of such groups, picturing oneself as a ‘free sovereign chooser’ in a hypothetical state of nature is ‘already wrong’ (124). Morgenbesser’s other contribution was a view about how philosophy ought to proceed. According to Morgenbesser, inquiry involves two distinct dimensions: a dimension of ‘evidence and reasoning’ (131), and a dimension connected with ‘human psychology and motivation’ (132). Philosophers tend to be much more interested in the first than the second, but as Morgenbesser saw it, we should not assume that ‘a fully rational person’s motives, commitments, and engagements would track the course of “the argument” in a simple and easily discernible way’ (133). We sometimes find an argument unconvincing despite not having an airtight refutation of it, and according to Morgenbesser, there need not be anything irrational about that. The third professor Geuss discusses is his doctoral supervisor, Robert Denoon Cumming. A patrician New Englander who had fought with the Free French, Cumming produced work that was ‘austere, complex, erudite, and highly unfashionable’ (139). His book *Human Nature and History*, now out of print, advanced a critique of liberalism that seems to have particularly resonated with Geuss. According to Cumming, liberalism is ‘incapable of making up its mind between two incompatible views’ (140) about what it is. It oscillates between seeing itself as a universal outlook grounded in ‘an invariant human nature’ (140), and taking itself to be a local response to some ‘specific political situation’ (141) such as the European wars of religion. Cumming argued that these views cannot be synthesized, but that neither is satisfactory on its own. Well before Rawls’s oscillations between these views in his later work, Cumming and Geuss were already convinced of ‘the essential incoherence of liberalism as a project’ (141).

The last two chapters describe some of Geuss’s formative experiences in Germany, and offer some broader reflections on his intellectual journey. Geuss spent the 1967-68 academic year in Freiburg, considering writing a dissertation on Heidegger. He abandoned that plan after deciding that Heidegger’s work was a hermetically sealed, ‘self-contained universe,’ and that ‘all one could do was either repeat what he said or simply turn one’s back on his work’ (147). Engaging critically with

Heidegger seemed impossible to Geuss. He then became fascinated with Paul Celan, the poet of ‘failure of comprehension’ (151). But the thinker who really replaced Heidegger in his personal canon was Adorno. Reading *Negative Dialectics*, Geuss was taken by the idea that ‘philosophy could not be summarized’ (152), and by the suggestion that ‘easy comprehensibility was not an invariably positive feature of discourse’ (153). Genuinely new ideas, and especially proposals that challenge the status quo, are likely to seem unclear, at least at first. The demand that all thoughts be easy to understand can thus be a way of filtering out proposals for radical change.

Like much of Geuss’s writing, *Not Thinking like a Liberal* is compulsively readable and very entertaining. His recollections of his teachers at Columbia are a helpful introduction to readers unfamiliar with them, and they also contain some great jokes. (Perhaps the best is a remark that Morgenbesser made about Cumming: ‘I am a Jew; I play basketball with whoever happens to be around. Bob is a New England Protestant; he plays basketball only with God alone’ (138)). There are terrific offhand discussions of all sorts of topics, ranging from the origins of the concept of authority (43), to papal infallibility (65), to the idea that studying past thinkers can be a way of redeeming the past (93). The book also exemplifies an appealing picture of what philosophy is. Geuss says that he has ‘always been mildly repelled by the idea that philosophy should be understood essentially as a matter of finding arguments and refutations’ (9). It can be more helpful to show that ‘it is *possible* (realistically) to think *this way*’ (9) than to try to show that one *has* to think some other way.

*Not Thinking like a Liberal* is a lovely book, staggeringly learned but also humane and wise. Though it feels like a one-off, I finished it hoping that Geuss would write other ethnographic accounts of his journey through the last half-decade of philosophy. The prospect of more jokes about playing basketball with God is only part of the draw.

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